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Delles, Christian

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Nuclear magnetic resonance-based metabolomics identifies phenylalanine as a novel predictor of incident heart failure hospitalisation: results from PROSPER and FINRISK 1997

Christian Delles^{1†}, Naomi J. Rankin^{1,2*†}, Charles Boachie³, Alex McConnachie³, Ian Ford³, Antti Kangas⁴, Pasi Soininen^{4,5}, Stella Trompet⁶, Simon P. Mooijaart⁶, J. Wouter Jukema⁶, Faiez Zannad^{7,8}, Mika Ala-Korpela^{4,5,9,10,11,12}, Veikko Salomaa¹³, Aki S. Havulinna^{13,14}, Paul Welsh¹, Peter Würtz¹⁵, and Naveed Sattar¹

¹Institute of Cardiovascular and Medical Sciences (ICAMS), BHF Glasgow Cardiovascular Research Centre, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; ²Glasgow Polyomics, Joseph Black Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; ³Robertson Centre for Biostatistics, Boyd Orr Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; ⁴Computational Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Biocenter Oulu, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland; ⁵NMR Metabolomics Laboratory, School of Pharmacy, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland; ⁶Leiden University Medical Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands; ⁷INSERM Centre d'Investigation Clinique (CIC) 1443, Université de Lorraine, Lorraine, France; ⁸Centre Hospitalier Régional Universitaire (CHRU) de Nancy, Nancy, France; ⁹Medical Research Council Integrative Epidemiology Unit, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; ¹⁰Population Health Science, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; ¹¹Systems Epidemiology, Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; ¹²Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, The Alfred Hospital, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; ¹³National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), Helsinki, Finland; ¹⁴Institute for Molecular Medicine (FIMM), University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; and ¹⁵Research Programs Unit, Diabetes and Obesity, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

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Aims

We investigated the association between quantified metabolite, lipid and lipoprotein measures and incident heart failure hospitalisation (HFH) in the elderly, and examined whether circulating metabolic measures improve HFH prediction.

Methods and results

Overall, 80 metabolic measures from the PROspective Study of Pravastatin in the Elderly at Risk (PROSPER) trial were measured by proton nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy ($n = 5341$; 182 HFH events during 2.7-year follow-up). We repeated the work in FINRISK 1997 ($n = 7330$; 133 HFH events during 5-year follow-up). In PROSPER, the circulating concentrations of 13 metabolic measures were found to be significantly different in those who were later hospitalised for heart failure after correction for multiple comparisons. These included creatinine, phenylalanine, glycoprotein acetyls, 3-hydroxybutyrate, and various high-density lipoprotein measures. In Cox models, two metabolites were associated with risk of HFH after adjustment for clinical risk factors and N-terminal pro-B-type natriuretic peptide (NT-proBNP): phenylalanine [hazard ratio (HR) 1.29, 95% confidence interval (CI) 1.10–1.53; $P = 0.002$] and acetate (HR 0.81, 95% CI 0.68–0.98; $P = 0.026$). Both were retained in the final model after backward elimination. Compared to a model with established risk factors and NT-proBNP, this model did not improve the C-index but did improve the overall continuous net reclassification index (NRI 0.21; 95% CI 0.06–0.35; $P = 0.007$) due to improvement in classification of non-cases (NRI 0.14; 95% CI 0.12–0.17; $P < 0.001$). Phenylalanine was replicated as a predictor of HFH in FINRISK 1997 (HR 1.23, 95% CI 1.03–1.48; $P = 0.023$).

Conclusion

Our findings identify phenylalanine as a novel predictor of incident HFH, although prediction gains are low. Further mechanistic studies appear warranted.

Keywords

Metabolomics • Advanced lipoprotein profiling • Heart failure • PROSPER • Phenylalanine • FINRISK

*Corresponding author. B4.18a Joseph Black Building, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK. Tel: +44 0141 300 3364, Email: naomi.rankin@glasgow.ac.uk

†These authors should be regarded as joint first authors.

Introduction

The prevention of heart failure (HF) is an important clinical issue. Patients with HF have a high mortality and impaired quality of life, so identifying those at risk is important.^{1,2} The risk of HF increases with age but typical symptoms of HF, such as shortness of breath, may be absent in the elderly (or masked by other co-morbidities); the prognosis of HF is poor, and the mechanisms of HF differ in the elderly.³ Treatment of hypertension and dyslipidaemia, prevention of diabetes, smoking cessation, increased exercise, weight reduction, and reduced alcohol intake have been associated with lower risks for HF.^{4–6} At present, symptomatic patients have B-type natriuretic peptide (BNP) or N-terminal proBNP (NT-proBNP) concentrations measured as a rule-out test for HF, a cost-effective strategy to increase the positive predictive value of echocardiography. However, routine screening for this marker as part of cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk screening is not cost-effective as the assay is currently much more expensive than other routine clinical laboratory tests.⁷ More effective screening for prevalent HF, perhaps using 'omics technologies, in combination with more effective interventions, has been described as an urgent need in the HF clinical arena.⁷ Such strategies might help pave the way toward better identification of HF, or identify novel treatment strategies. Studies to improve the understanding of HF aetiology and generate new hypothesis, particularly in the elderly, are also needed.

Metabolomics is the study of the small molecule complement of a system using a variety of methods, mainly mass spectrometry (MS) and proton nuclear magnetic resonance (¹H-NMR) spectroscopy.⁸ Both methods are complementary, each with their own strengths and limitations.⁸ MS metabolomics methods are generally very sensitive, detecting thousands of metabolites, but routinely provide only relative (rather than absolute) quantitation. Generally, ¹H-NMR metabolomics methods have poor sensitivity in comparison to MS but do provide absolute quantitation, higher throughput (resulting in reduced costs), and better reproducibility. Metabolomics is of particular interest, since HF is strongly linked to metabolic dysfunction. Dysregulation of cardiac energy metabolism and cardiac remodelling are key features of HF that may result in changes in circulating metabolite concentrations, and adverse metabolic states like diabetes increase HF risk.^{9–11} Whether changes in metabolic profile precede incident HF is therefore an important mechanistic line of research. Metabolomics has been used to study prevalent HF,^{9,10,12–20} but most studies have been cross-sectional in nature. Presently, only one study has prospectively investigated the association of the metabolome with future HF risk.¹³ This study used an untargeted gas chromatography/MS metabolomics method to identify two metabolites associated with incident HF.¹³ In contrast, we here employ a ¹H-NMR spectroscopy method that allowed detailed lipoprotein subclass analysis, in addition to small molecule and lipid concentrations,²¹ to study samples from the PROspective Study of Pravastatin in the Elderly at Risk (PROSPER) trial.²² We hypothesised that metabolites, lipids and lipoproteins would associate with HF hospitalisation (HFH) in elderly men and women and improve HFH prediction beyond established clinical predictors and NT-proBNP.

Methods

Study cohort: PROSPER

The PROSPER trial design has been published.²² In brief, this was a double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled trial investigating the benefit of pravastatin (40 mg/day) in elderly individuals at risk of CVD. Participants were identified in the primary care setting from three centres: Glasgow, Scotland; Cork, Ireland; and Leiden, The Netherlands. Overall, 5804 elderly adults (70–82 years old) were enrolled. All participants had high-normal to high cholesterol concentrations (4.0–9.0 mmol/L) at baseline. Additionally, 50% of patients had evidence of vascular disease (physician diagnosed stable angina, stroke, transient ischaemic attack, or myocardial infarction) and the remaining 50% of patients had high risk of vascular disease as they had either hypertension, diabetes, or were smokers. Individuals with congestive HF [New York Heart Association (NYHA) class III and IV] were excluded. The primary outcome measure of PROSPER was a composite CVD outcome. In the current study, the endpoint of interest was hospitalisation for incident HF. This was defined based on a combination of symptoms (e.g. shortness of breath) and signs, including chest radiograph with fluid congestion or echocardiogram with severely diminished left ventricular function.²³ Patients were recruited between December 1997 and May 1999, and the mean follow-up period was 3.2 years.²⁴ The investigation conforms with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The institutional ethics review boards of all three European centres approved the study protocol.²⁵ All participants provided written informed consent to participate in the study and for long-term follow-up.

Fasting venous blood samples were collected at baseline and at 3-month intervals and biobanked at –80 °C. For the present study, previously unfrozen 6-month post-randomisation samples were used, employing the study as a cohort study and adjusting for randomised treatment in analysis. Overall, 5341 samples were available for this study, having sample available for ¹H-NMR analysis and available 6-month NT-proBNP and other measurements²⁴ (Figure 1). Estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) was calculated based on routinely available creatinine, using the Modification of Diet in Renal Disease (MDRD) equation.²⁶ Eighteen participants who had died or experienced HFH in the first 6 months of follow-up were excluded from the analysis since 6-month samples were used as predictors of incident HFH.

External replication cohort: FINRISK

The population-based FINRISK 1997 cohort was used as an external replication cohort. Participants were aged between 25 and 74 years at recruitment and were derived from the general population in five study areas across Finland.²⁷ All participants provided written informed consent and the study protocol was approved by the local ethics committees. A total of 8444 individuals were recruited and NMR metabolic measures were available for 7602 baseline serum samples. Semi-fasting venous blood samples were biobanked at –80 °C. For the present study, samples with only one previous freeze–thaw cycle were used. Incident HF during follow-up was identified through the Finnish National Hospital Discharge Register and Cause-of-Death Register using the International Classification of Diseases diagnosis codes, 10th revision. Additionally, nationwide drug reimbursement and prescription registers were used to identify individuals on HF medication. This method of registry follow-up has been validated.²⁷ We curtailed follow-up to 5 years (longer than the 2.7 years in PROSPER)

5804 randomised
(2913 to placebo; 2891 to pravastatin)

5432 with 6-month dem

5341 with 6-month sample
analysed by NMR

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Conflicts of interest: N.S. has consulted for AstraZeneca, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Amgen, Sanofi and Boehringer Ingelheim. A.K., P.S., and P.W. have employment relation with Brainshake Ltd, and are shareholders of Brainshake Ltd, a company offering NMR-based metabolite and lipoprotein profiling. The other authors report no conflict of interest.

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